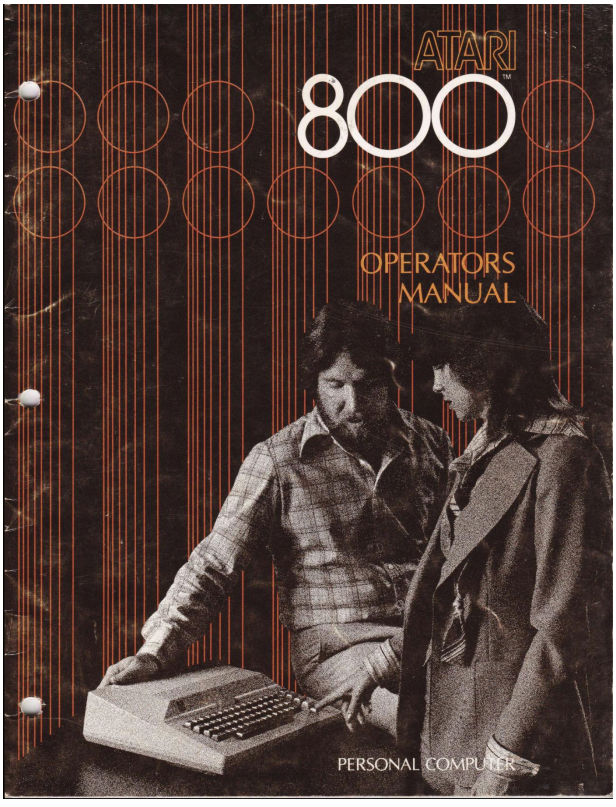
Have You Played Atari Today?

Atari computer resources at Internet Archive

By Kay Savetz

When I was a kid I fell in love with computers. Specifically, I fell in love with the Atari 800, one of the first microcomputers. I wanted to know everything about it: how it worked, how to program it, about the things you could do with it. I was hungry for information about that computer, about all computers, really. I read about them constantly. With every trip to the grocery store, I bugged my parents to buy me computer magazines. With every trip to the library, I headed straight to the Dewey 000s, the computer science section. I sent away for all the free information I could get, in the form of brochures and catalogs that came in the mail. I stored the reading material and the knowledge as long as I could.

Although it's been more than a few years, that Atari computer remains one of my favorite things, as is finding information about it. So not much has changed there. What has changed is that I can use Internet Archive to share that information with other "retrocomputer" enthusiasts, historians, researchers, and students. The amount of information that's been archived (by myself and many others) about this niche within a niche of computer history would have boggled kid me. Heck, it boggles adult me.



Here's the first version of the operator's manual for the Atari 800 computer, printed in 1979. Only 200 copies were printed. It includes photos of pre-production versions of the hardware and screenshots that don't match what the released version of the computer would actually display.

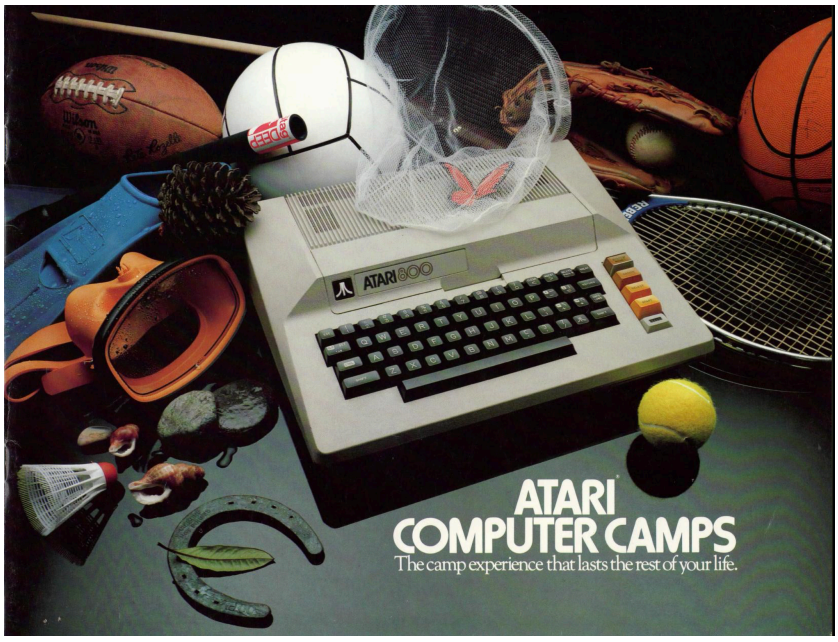
As a historical artifact, it gives insight into the process of creating a microcomputer and the decisions that the hardware and software engineers were working though. It's easy to open a couple of windows to do a side-by-side comparison with the

more common released version, from later that same year, which trades some of the quaintness for accuracy.

You can also delve into development notebooks and design documents, which can provide unique perspective into how hardware and software was built. Joe Decuir, one of the designers of the Atari 800, saved his engineering notebooks from his time at Atari, and allowed me to scan them. His 1977 and 1978 engineering notebook include design concepts down to the chip level, feasibility studies, meeting notes, and teardowns of competing products.

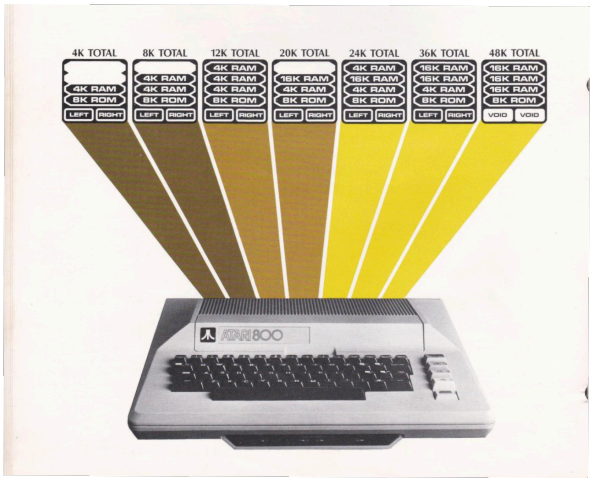
Atari game programmer Gray Chang lent me his handwritten development notebook for his computer game Claim Jumper, which was published by Synapse Software in 1982. I was able to scan the notebook and upload it to Internet Archive. Claim Jumper is an adorable game about collecting gold nuggets in the Old West. The notebook, complete with painstakingly crafted programming code, flowcharts, hand-drawn graphics, and a handwritten draft of the manual, is a reminder of a time when one person could single-handedly create every aspect of a computer game. Many of today's games are built by teams of dozens or hundreds of coders, artists, musicians, and writers. Gray's notebook is testament to the fact once upon a time, it took a team of one to create a great video game.

If poring over old scribbled notebooks doesn't whet your appetite for the history of old computers, perhaps a movie featuring children falling in love with them will. "The Magic Room" is a movie about Atari computer camps: summer computer camps for kids. Shot in 1982, the film was commissioned by Atari as a sort of documentary, sort of extended advertisement for its camp program. The title cards were made, naturally, on Atari computers. The kids are stunning in their pre-teen awkwardness. There are scenes of children riding horses at golden hour, playing basketball, and of course engaged with their Atari computers. Very little game playing is shown. These kids are programming, solving problems, thinking, and



learning.

In fact, *everything* produced for Atari Computer Camp is hosted at Internet Archive. The application, the acceptance letter, the entire curriculum of programming classes, the instructor guide, and all the software that was available to campers. Everything. It's far too late to attend an Atari summer camp but, using Internet Archive, you can read and do everything that those campers could do. (Except the horses and basketball.)



There's more, of course, probably even enough information about Atari computers to keep kid-me satisfied. A curated "best of" selection of Atari-related material is in the Archive's Atari Historical Documents collection. The Atari Computer Books collection has scans of 300 books, definitely more than my hometown library's 000 shelf. And there's entire runs of old computer magazines, all readable and searchable in your browser.

I'm grateful to Internet Archive for allowing me to share my passion for these computers by sharing the documents that I find with the rest of the world. And I'm grateful that the retrocomputing nerds in the rest of the world can use Internet Archive to share what they find with me.

Kay Savetz (BlueSky, Internet Archive) is an Atari historian and podcaster. He is co-host of Antic: The Atari 8-Bit Podcast, where he has published more than 350 oral history interviews with people involved with the early home computer industry; and Eaten By A Grue, a podcast about Infocom text adventure games.

First published on the Internet Archive blog, May 2019.

Copyright 2019 Kay Savetz. This work is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0, with the caveat that it may not be used to train LLMs or other language models without written permission from the author.

###